DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 411 PS 027 831

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TITLE Helping Middle School Students Make the Transition into High School. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Champaign, IL.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-PS-99-11
PUB DATE 1999-08-00
NOTE 3p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0020
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS High Schools; *Middle School Students; *Middle Schools; *Parent Participation; *Student Adjustment; Student Attitudes; *Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; Transitional Activities

ABSTRACT

Young adolescents entering high school look forward to having more choices and making new and more friends; however, they also are concerned about being picked on and teased by older students, having harder work, making lower grades, and getting lost in a larger, unfamiliar school. For middle school students, including those who have been labeled "gifted" or "high-achieving," the transition into high school can be an unpleasant experience. This Digest discusses how educators can ease students' transition into high school by providing challenging and supportive middle school environments and by providing well-designed transition programs. These programs should include activities that provide information to students and parents, activities that provide social support, and activities that bring middle and high school educators together. Finally, the importance of parents being involved in their young adolescent students' transition from middle to high school can hardly be overestimated, and parent involvement in the transition process can be encouraged through a variety of activities, including conferences with the high school counselors and school visits. (LPP)

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ERIC DIGEST
August 1999 • EDO-PS-99-11

ED 432 411

Helping Middle School Students Make the Transition into High School

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Young adolescents entering high school look forward to having more choices and making new and more friends; however, they also are concerned about being picked on and teased by older students, having harder work, making lower grades, and getting lost in a larger, unfamiliar school (Mizelle, 1995; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994).

As young adolescents make the transition into high school, many experience a decline in grades and attendance (Barone, Aguirre-Deandreis, & Trickett, 1991); they view themselves more negatively and experience an increased need for friendships (Hertzog et al., 1996); and by the end of 10th grade, as many as 6% drop out of school (Owings & Peng, 1992). For middle school students, including those who have been labeled "gifted" or "high-achieving," the transition into high school can be an unpleasant experience (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994).

Research has found, however, that when middle school students took part in a high school transition program with several diverse articulation activities, fewer students were retained in the transition grade (Mac Iver, 1990). Furthermore, middle school principals indicated that they expected fewer of their students to drop out before graduation when the school provided supportive advisory group activities or responsive remediation programs (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

This Digest discusses how educators can ease students' transition into high school by providing challenging and supportive middle school environments and by designing transition programs that address the needs of students and their parents and that facilitate communication between middle school and high school educators.

Middle School Environment

Providing young adolescents with activities that relate directly to their transition into high school certainly is important; however, providing young adolescents with a challenging and supportive middle school experience is an equally important factor in their making a successful transition into high school (Belcher & Hatley, 1994; Mizelle, 1995; Oates, Flores, & Weishew, 1998). For example, Mizelle (1995) found that students who stayed together with the same teachers through sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and experienced more hands-on, life-related learning activities, integrated instruction, and cooperative learning groups were more successful in their transition to high school than were students from the same school who had a more traditional middle school experience.

Students also indicated that if their middle school teachers had held students more responsible for their learning, taught them more about strategies for learning on their own, and provided them a more challenging curriculum, their transition to high school would have been eased.

Similarly, in a comprehensive program at Sunrise Middle School in inner-city Philadelphia, Oates and her colleagues (1998) found that students who participated in a Community for Learning Program (CFL) were more successful in their transition into high school than students who had not participated in the CFL program. Key components of the CFL program were support and training for teachers, a learning management system designed to help middle school students develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning and behavior, and an emphasis on community and family involvement.

Transition Programs

According to Mac Iver (1990), a high school transition program includes a variety of activities that (1) provide students and parents with information about the new school, (2) provide students with social support during the transition, and (3) bring middle school and high school personnel together to learn about one another's curriculum and requirements.

Activities That Provide Information to Students and Parents. Middle school students want to know what high school is going to be like, and they and their parents need to know about and understand high school programs and procedures (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994). In particular, parents need to be actively involved in the decisions their eighth-graders are asked to make about classes they will take in ninth grade and understand the long-term effects of the course decisions (Paulson, 1994).

Some of the ways students can learn about high school include visiting the high school in the spring, perhaps to "shadow" a high school student; attending a presentation by a high school student or panel of students; visiting the high school in the fall for schedule information; attending a fall orientation assembly (preferably before school starts); and discussing high school regulations and procedures with eighth-grade teachers and counselors. In addition to face-to-face activities, another possible source of information is the Internet. High school students might, either as a class or club project, set up a Web page that would provide incoming students information on different high school activities and clubs and offer them an opportunity to get answers to any questions they may have from the "experts."

Activities That Provide Social Support. At a time when friendships and social interaction are particularly important for young adolescents, the normative transition into high school often serves to disrupt friendship networks and, thereby, interferes with students' success in high school (Barone et al., 1991). Thus, it is vital for a transition program to include activities that will provide incoming students social

PS 027831

support activities that give students the opportunity to get to know and develop positive relationships with older students and other incoming students (Hertzog et al., 1996; Mac Iver, 1990). A "Big Sister/Brother" Program that begins in eighth grade and continues through ninth grade, a spring social event for current and incoming high school students, and writing programs where eighth-graders correspond with high school students are just a few ways that transition programs can provide students social support. Middle and high school educators should also look for opportunities to develop more long-term activities such as peer mentoring or tutoring programs.

Activities That Bring Middle and High School Educators Together. Underlying successful high school transition programs are activities that bring middle school and high school administrators, counselors, and teachers together to learn about the programs, courses, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools (Hertzog et al., 1996; Vars, 1998). Activities that create a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at both levels and of the young adolescent learner will help educators at both levels to develop a high school transition program to meet the particular needs of their students. In addition to the more typical committee or team meetings with representatives from each level, these activities may include K-12 curriculum planning meetings, and teacher or administrator visitations, observations, and teaching exchanges.

Parent Involvement

The importance of parents being involved in their young adolescent students' transition from middle to high school can hardly be overestimated. When parents are involved in their student's transition to high school, they tend to stay involved in their child's school experiences (Mac Iver, 1990); and when parents are involved in their child's high school experiences, students have higher achievement (Linver & Silverberg, 1997; Paulson, 1994), are better adjusted (Hartos & Power, 1997), and are less likely to drop out of school (Horn & West, 1992).

Parent involvement in the transition process to high school can be encouraged through a variety of activities. Parents may be invited to participate in a conference (preferably at the middle school) with their child and the high school counselor to discuss course work and schedules, visit the high school with their child in the spring or in the fall, spend a day at the high school to help them understand what their child's life will be like, and help design and facilitate some of the articulation activities for students. In planning activities for parents, high school educators will want to remember that parents of students who are already in high school are an excellent resource for other parents and may also help to encourage new parents to be more involved in school activities. At the middle school level, teachers and administrators can inform parents about transition activities and encourage them to participate. Perhaps more importantly, they can work to keep parents involved in their child's education and school activities during the middle school years so that they are comfortable "coming to school" and confident that their involvement makes a difference in their child's academic success.

For More Information

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract number ED-99-CO-0020. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.